

Review: Beautiful, Breakable Objects in Celia Eberle's "The Drowning"

Ophelia, I feel ya. Caught between the grownups in your life and their impossible demands, it's no wonder you flung yourself into that river. Blame it on your youth. In *The Drowning* at Ulterior Gallery in New York City, works by multimedia artist Celia Eberle echo a similar, sinister sentiment. Scores of ceramic fish plummet from the gallery's walls — gasping and struggling — while a statue of a small winged child squats on the floor, tending to their demise.

"I wanted to reduce a living thing into an object," Eberle tells me at the show's opening, which is also her debut solo presentation in New York. "A beautiful object — but it's in trouble."

Growing up in East Texas, behind the "Pine Curtain" as it's been called, the artist encountered something of a Southern Gothic setting, where genteel characters and rougher pioneer types occupied the same rural tableau. Eberle says her family was the latter. Her work reflects a deep sensitivity to the place, both its social refinements and the darker realities that lurked in the near distance. A nagging foreboding in an otherwise idyllic picture.

The Drowning takes some time to sink in. Decorative carp and cherubic figures (not to mention a fairytale castle made of bone) initially convey as objects of beauty. But the objects are trying to tell us something. The fish appear wide-eyed; their mouths are fixed open, desperate for water. The gallery, of course, is drier than a bone.



The small winged statue, *Seated Spirit* (2025), innocently plays with the gasping fish collecting at his feet. Reminiscent of Icarus, who fell from the sky straight into the sea, the boy doesn't seem to notice that he, too, is in over his head. A second youthful figure — also winged and also naked — serenely stretches across the adjacent wall. *Drowned Spirit* (2025) could be floating or could be falling, depending on your sense of gravity. The statue, about three feet in length, is based on a small Greco-Roman piece in The Getty Museum collection titled *Statuette of a Dead Youth* (c. 475 BC), cast in solid bronze, and originally designed to be a handle on a vessel.

"I was inspired by this little five-inch figure because it suggests the idea of this beautiful thing that's really just being used," says Eberle. "A dead youth as a handle? It speaks to an abusive culture."

Given the object's classical antiquity origin, a cultural throughline can be traced across millennia right up to the present with society's tendencies to worship and devour its young. Historically, metaphorically, Eberle matter-of-factly points out the abuse is nothing new. "All of my work is basically about how we don't change, we're the same people we were eons ago. Our needs and interests are what they always were. And so we're constantly drawn to the same images and ideas."



Mythical figures and decorative fish might make for a peculiar pairing, but the artist sees a clear connection between their beauty and susceptibility. In the series *Fish* (2024-25) each object's individuated aesthetic details are highlighted — painted and glazed with their own personalities — and displayed as an attractive collection. Will they seek safer waters? From the stunned look on their faces, probably not. As for the two classical youth statues, painted black to mimic solid cast bronze, they are also ceramic like the fish — and will break just as easily.

Across the gallery, an ivory colored castle is perched on the wall, its symmetrical proportions not unlike a dollhouse. *Promise* (2022) is fit for a princess, with glass beads for windows and carefully crenellated battlements cut from cow bone. The installation first appeared in the artist's 2022 solo exhibition *Waiting For Robot* at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, yet its macabre charm lends itself to the show at *Uterior*. Eberle, now in her 70s, lives just south of Dallas, where there is no shortage of cattle carcasses to work with. Nothing slaughtered, she assures me; the cows have died a natural death.

If only the tragic, mythic figures in *The Drowning* had been so lucky.

Celie Eberle: *The Drowning* runs through May 30, 2025, at *Uterior* Gallery in New York City.

